William Carlos Williams: The Quest for a Redeeming Language

Minoru Hirooka

I

From ancient times the poet has been called a maker of language and a new order. It is needless to say that words are the instrument the poet plays on, and what he works with. A poet starts with words; then he puts his words together into some sort of structure. This structuring is his ordering. The poet attempts not only to discover a fresh language and new foot out of which poems can be constructed. He also searches for a new way of measuring value that will be commensurate with the world in which he lives. The kind of language which was adequately used in measuring the past life is now outmoded and no longer applicable. Only through the invention of a new speech for the poem can there be any meaningful expression of contemporary life. Thus the poet is more than a maker of speech. He is also a social regenerator in searching for a new measure of reality.

Poets are, as it were, the antennae of the age and the race, and their primary concern is the use of words that do fit the reality, that can say what they want to communicate. If we look back into the history of poetry, we can understand that many great poets have tried to give poetry a new vitality by discovering a fresh language and new measure more adequate to their purpose and the situation of their age. Searching for a new possibility of the English language, Chaucer made experiments on meters and rhymes and found a new rhythm appropriate to him and his language. He aimed at simplicity and naturalness, and tried to approach the colloquial speech.[1] Wordsworth also gave poetry a new vitality by emphasizing spoken language. He tried to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them as far as possible in a selection of language really used by

men. How about American poets? Whitman was the first American poet that devoted much of his creative life to discovering new ways to break away from stultifying domination of copied forms in order to record the unique American experience in the American language. He broke the old line and sang in free verse and in the open form. The kind of freedom which an individualized American language could unlock is what gives vitality and identity to his "Song of Myself."

It is indeed an interesting but difficult question to discuss what modern American writers have done with the American language. Of course at the beginning of the twentieth century and afterward, there was an increasing awareness of the development of an individualized American language. American writers were no longer cultural colonials. It is no wonder that the works of modern American writers are full of national idioms. But it is important to note that there appeared a new generation of writers who did not have to think about the American language since it was theirs and they had it. So it would be better to say that they tried to use "not just a national idiom but a contemporary idiom." [2] More often they created a truly personal idiom in the end. It can be said, moreover, that even if they used the same words as the English did, their words meant an entirely different thing. It is also important to note, on the other hand, that so many languages and cultural strains had been brought to America and so many fresh cultural impacts were introduced from other countries that the problem of language and the fusion of diverse cultures were the preoccupations of American writers. Both Eliot and Pound were American by birth, but ironically the very nature of the American experience made their great preoccupation with words and impelled them to search for European or Oriental cultural traditions. On the contrary, it was William Carlos Williams who insisted on "the importance of American speech rhythms and of a continual effort on the part of American poets to seek out the essential meaning of their surroundings." [3] Williams was devoted to the American idiom and instinctively turned to the facts of his everyday life for poetic material. Though a friend and admirer of Pound, he wished to establish "localism as an alternative to Pound's internationalism; Eliot and

The Waste Land were for Williams a catastrophe in the history of American poetry."[4]

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, in 1883. His father, who never gave up his British citizenship, did not want his son to become an American. His mother, who was Jewish, French and Spanish, preferring to speak Spanish in the home, seemed an exile in industrial northern New Jersey. He identified his mother, as he himself has said, with all that was romantic, free, heroic, rebellious, in short, with the self he wanted to become. Like many second-generation citizens, though, he put down deep roots. In a letter to Horace Gregory, in 1939, he writes:

> Of mixed ancestry, I felt from earliest childhood that America was the only home I could ever possibly call my own. I felt that it was expressly founded for me, personally, and that it must be my first business in life to possess it; that only by making it my own from the beginning to my own day, in detail, should I ever have a basis for knowing where I stood.[5]

Following his education (Horace Mann School in New York, and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia) and his medical internship in New York, he became a doctor. As a full-time general practitioner he carried on an exhausting practice and delivered over two thousand babies, and yet somehow managed to be perhaps the most influential and original poet of this century. As a doctor he had unique chances to know at first hand the poetic vitality of the common language.

In his *Autobiography* he writes:

> It is then we see by this constant feeling for a meaning, from the unselected nature of the material, just as it comes in over the phone or at the office door, that there is no better way to get an intimation of what is going on in the world....
>
> The physician enjoys a wonderful opportunity actually to witness the words being born. The actual colors and shapes are laid before him carrying their tiny burdens which he is privileged to take into his care with their unspoiled newness.[6]

For Williams the new metric already existed in the sounds of American speech, "hidden, inner quality." His first job was to find it there by submitting to what he heard around him: "The poet's business is to find that basis, to discover it in the speech around him and to build it into his compositions."[7] Still it (the new form) must be made. To put it in reverse, the poem is made, composed, and yet it must use words as they are already interrelated in common speech, without distortion. Here is the paradox of invention. This constitutes an important facet of Williams' quest for a new language.

When we look back upon the whole poetic career of Williams, we cannot help noticing his dilemma he must have suffered from. As a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania, he became friendly with Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle, and later came to know Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens and other poets and artists. It was Pound who launched him as a poet. The poems he was writing before he met Pound were what can be described as free verse, formless, after Whitman. But Pound put an end to that. As Pearce put it, "*Song of Myself* is phrased according to the movement of a creative, expressive sensibility; the *Cantos* are constellated according to the ordering of a precision-grinding exacting sensibility."[8] The influence of the scholarly, cosmopolitan Pound was profound. Williams was bullied by his old friend in print and in conversation for years. In *Paterson* Williams remembers Pound's taunt: "Your interest is in the bloody loam but what/I'm after is the finished product."[9] It was not until Pound's decline, leading to St. Elizabeth's (mental) Hospital, that he was able to free himself from feelings of academic and literary subservience. The root of Williams' confusion and dilemma may be found in mixed feelings of loyalty and antagonism toward Pound and Eliot and his feeling for his mother. The two paramount influences, his mother and Pound, working at different levels of consciousness, pulled him in different directions. As H. H. Waggoner points out rightly, the two meant to Williams "romantic and realism, freedom and authority, impulse and discipline, the unconscious and the conscious."[10]

His antagonism toward Eliot serves to point up his dilemma. He was just on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a

new art form rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. It was a shock to him that Eliot's "Prufrock" and *The Waste Land* proved to be so tremendously successful and his contemporaries flocked to him – away from what he wanted. It seemed to him that Eliot was a conformist, looking backward, with wit and learning which he did not possess. He felt Eliot had rejected America and turned his back on the possibility of reviving his world. Williams also had a somewhat jaundiced view of the academies:

> I couldn't speak like the academy. It had to be modified by the conversation about me. As Marianne Moore used to say, a language dogs and cats could understand....Not the speech of English country people, which would have something artificial about it; not that, but language modified by our environment; the American environment.[11)]

Again and again he stresses the importance of American speech. Where else, he asks, can what we are seeking arise but from speech?

> From speech, from American speech as distinct from English speech...from what we hear in America....A language full of those hints toward newness of which I have been speaking.[12)]

It is evident that Williams instinctively defended and celebrated the native and the local; and that he intended, despite repeated denials, to affirm the beauty and interest of the commonplace, the apparently trivial, the outcast and outlawed and despised. He wrote not only poems but also stories, plays, and essays. In spite of the breadth and excellence of his works, his reputation never really caught up with him during his lifetime. In the years since 1963 when he did die, however, his reputation, popular and critical, has risen dramatically. "American poetry," Hugh Kenner has written, "groups itself around twin peaks, Williams and Whitman."[13)] Williams was indeed in the Whitman tradition, very deeply so, even if he didn't, with a part of his mind, intend to be. Attracted to Whitman at the beginning, then warned off by Pound, he was closer to him in the end than he knew. "Whitman's

proposals," Williams himself said, "are of the same piece with the modern trend toward imaginative understanding of life."[14]

The purpose of this article is to examine what ideas he had of words and language, to follow his quest for a redeeming language in *Paterson* which is his major achievement, and to discuss what kind of invention he made in it.

II

On entering the twentieth century, many serious American writers had to realize a great change of the world. Instead of the Virgin, they stood before the comfortless Dynamo. All that they witnessed was a delirium of change and the chaos of the Electric Phase. This dramatic realization of change was the plight of the author of *The Education of Henry Adams.* The older conceptions and definitions of the universe were insufficient to explain phenomena. A new way of measuring reality was demanded. In the midst of highly industrialized society full of mental strains, sensitive American poets were compelled to recognize the cleavage between inner and outer experience (or between interpretation and experience). Their primary concern was to find a way to close or to bridge that gap and to search for fresh language taking a new measure of reality.

Gertrude Stein was a forerunner. She went to Paris and became intimate with young artists who were to become the foremost painters of this century. They—Picasso, Braque, Matisse—were doing in paint exactly what she was trying to do with words: to break away from convention, to let the medium triumph over the subject, to attain simplicity. In some of her writing she tried to divorce words from their usual meanings, and to arrange them like objects in a cubist composition. In other work she described people and situations in a language that was full of repetitions and banalities, like an abstraction of the common speech of uneducated people. She hoped thereby to convey the immediacy of existence. She laid stress on concentration, penetration. Nouns are only names and are to be omitted

wherever possible; the verb is what counts in a sentence. Punctuation is likewise a hindrance: out go the question-mark, the colon, the semi-colon. She also conferred status upon the native idiom, serenely sure that the provincial gaucheries of America were close to the new mood of cosmopolitan literature. She imparted to modern American writers the valuable assurance that the unaffected prose of Mark Twain and the American newspaper-column was, with modifications, the ideal vehicle of the *avant–garde*.

What we have to notice here is that the return to the facts of immediate experience and to a primordial union of subject and object is a widespread tendency in twentieth century thought and art. This tendency may be identified in painters from Cézanne through cubism to abstract expressionism. It may be seen in contemporary poets like Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. It may be found in the tradition of phenomenology from Husserl through Heideggar and Merleau-Ponty.

Williams insists on the importance of immediacy in space and immediacy in time. Here is everywhere for Williams, and there is no world to go to. There is no lure of distances which stretch out beyond what can be immediately seen. Nothing exists but what stands just before the poet's wide-awaken senses. The present alone is, and the aim of a poem must therefore be "to refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live."[15] His poetry is content to let things be. A good poet, he says, "doesn't select his material. What is there to select? It is."[16] The poet, he says, has that power of "seeing the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception" which he praises in his mother.[17] The celebrated slogan of his objectivist art "No ideas but in things," is a shorthand expression of the identification of mind and universe. After he experienced a sort of resignation to existence, he entered a region of copresence in which anywhere is everywhere, and all times are one time, and established a self coextensive with the universe.[18] When he spoke of flowers, he became a flower. He was absorbed into the Passaic, or he took the river into himself. His situation may be described as "the mind turned inside out"[19] into the world, or, alternatively, as the world turned inside

out into the mind.

Well, then, what ideas did he have of words and language? In the romantic or idealist tradition words were instruments which the poet could use to reach and grapple objects in order to close the gap between himself and them. The idea that words "represent" things is deeply a part of metaphysical thinking. Williams never uses words in this way.

Words are first of all things for Williams. A word is its sound and feel in the mouth when spoken, or the way it looks on the page.

> But can you not see, can you not taste, can you not smell, can you not hear, can you not touch – words?. . . Words roll, spin, flare up, rumble, trickle, foam – [20)]

But words,of course, have their meaning. In the realm where man and things are one there is nothing which is not intrinsically meaningful. Every gesture, every flower, every stone has its meaning as part of its substance, and words contain their meaning as an inextricable part of themselves. Like gesture or facial expressions words are ways man affirms his solidarity with the world.

Language, however, can get encrusted with old emotions and ideological associations. When this happens its validity is lost. Authentic language must spring from the present moment. He says:

> We have no words. Every word we get must be broken off from the European mass. Every word we get placed over again by some delicate hand. Piece by piece we must loosen what we want.[21)]

How can words be renewed? It can be done partly by a chastity in the choice of words. When a word combines with other words, meaning emerges from the structural relations of a group of words together. But the naked virtue of a word is often invisible in a sentence, so he attempted to make the word visible as a thing itself. Williams praised Marianne Moore's way of using words: "Marianne's words remain separate, each unwilling to group with the others except as they move in one direction."[22)] One of his

experiments in his poems was to dissociate words from their past associations, from their "dead weight of logical burdens,"[23] and from "greasy contexts" so that, as in the poetry of Marianne Moore, each word could stand "crystal clear with no attachments."[24] He emphasized the syntax of simple sentences, the "grammatical play" of words which he praised in the work of Gertrude Stein.[25] He used short lines to slow down the pace, break grammatical units, and place ordinarily unnoticed words in positions of prominence so that their qualities as centers of linguistic energy might stand out. He not unexpectedly approved Charles Olson's theory of "composition by field."[26] Words, like other things, exist primarily as energies, directed forces. When words are placed side by side against the white field of the page, they interact with one another to creat a space occupied by energies in mobile tension. He also approved Olson's statement that "the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes"[27] and searched for the cadences of a new metric, the modulation of words according to the natural measure of breathing. Authentic language, he says, is "the middle brain, the nerves, the glands, the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking."[28] He says "that we smell, hear and see words and words alone, and that with a new language we smell, hear and see afresh."[29] Minimizing of eyesight, he emphasized the more intimate senses, hearing, tasting, smelling and above all touch. He thinks with his muscles and bones rather than with ideas. When a thing has passed into muscles, then language can express the things by matching the movements of those muscles. Here is one reason for his praise of the verb. His poems are a dance of words rising from the kinesthetic pantomime of the activity of nature.

> To copy nature is a spineless activity; it gives us a sense of our mere existence but hardly more than that. But to imitate nature involves the verb: we then ourselves become nature, and so invent an object which is an extension of the process.[30]

By illuminating the object exactly, his poems affirm the object's

independence and thereby free the words to execute their dance of imagination above the body of the world.

> The word is not liberated, therefore able to communicate release from the fixities which destroy it until it is accurately turned to the fact which giving it reality, by its own reality established its own freedom from the necessity of a word, thus freeing it and dynamizing it at the same time.[31)]

Poetry lifts things up. Its aim is "to repair, to rescue, to complete."[32)] Language is the unique power man has to bring beauty out of hiding and in doing so to lift up, to repair, to rescue, to complete. The poet's language uncovers the presence of things present. This presence inheres in things and people and in our speech:

> It is actually there, in the life before us, every minute that we are listening, a rarest element – not in our imaginations but there, there in fact. It is that essence which is hidden in every word which is going in at our ears and from which we must recover underlying meaning as realistically as we recover metal out of ore.[33)]

This presence, "a rarest element," however, is hidden from most men, for the language fails them. Authentic speech sustains man's openness to the world. Even though man's language is corrupt, this presence will still be there and will still be a revelation of beauty. But the people of *Paterson* cannot communicate with another or with the ground which ought to support them. The failure of language means a failure of man's power to perceive the things and share their lives. The loss of a proper language accompanies man's detachment from the world and from other people. Whenever a linguistic, physical, or human form is separated from the parent ground it dies. For Williams reality lies only in the present moment, and any form must continue to draw its energy from the living earth. In the next chapter I'd like to follow the theme of the degradation of language and the poet's quest for a redeeming language in *Paterson.*

III

Paterson is Williams' major achievement, and it is one of the great works of American literature. Like Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, Pound's *Cantos*, and Crane's *The Bridge*, it is the account of a poet's ambitious journey into the depths of his own sensibility and across the landscape of contemporary civilization. It is an attempt to find a language capable of giving adequate expression to the America he knew intimately. By means of an examination of a specific local place, including its history and the people who make it up, Williams attempts to discover the nature of the American experience. The poem does, moreover, involve a quest for a redeeming language that will cure modern ills and prevent man from the necessity of dying incommunicado. Everything in this poem is related, either directly or obliquely, to the quest for a redeeming language.

Paterson consists of five books: "The Delineaments of the Giants," "Sunday in the Park," "The Library," "The Run to the Sea," and Book V. The following lines in the "Preface" make clear the poet's starting point:

> To make a start,
> out of particulars
> and make them general, rolling
> up the sum, by defective means—
> Sniffing the trees,
> just another dog
> among a lot of dogs. What
> else is there? And to do?
> The rest have run out—
> after the rabbits.
> Only the lame stands—on
> three legs. Scratch front and back.
> Deceive and eat. Dig
> a musty bone[34)]

They suggest the poet's "local pride" and announce his inductive process of

moving gradually from specific things to general ideas. The "defective means" refers to language, and the poet's imperfect skill. In humility the poet likens himself to an old dog. The dog remains at home getting to know the particulars in order to know the general. Those who have "run out after the rabbits" almost certainly refers to the poets (particularly Pound and Eliot) who left their native grounds.

Where is Paterson? It is in New Jersey. The Passaic River flows toward Paterson and over the Passaic Falls, moves past Rutherford, and enters Newark Bay. Who is Paterson? Paterson is "one man — like a city" and "the city/the man, an identity." Paterson, the city, is described as a "giant" and becomes identified with various facets and citizens of the city. The man, changing his name, his role and his sex, undergoes many dispersals and metamorphorses. Paterson evolves from the giant into a specific man, the poet Paterson, then into Mr. Paterson, Noah Faitoute Paterson, a physician as well as a writer, the female Paterson and becomes identified with America and William Carols Williams himself.

At the opening of Book I, he is introduced as a giant and the city, river, Falls and mountain are all described in relation to the giant. The Falls is the most important symbol in the poem, representing the tangled rush of language, which the poet must comb out if he is to discover the secret of the roar. Paterson asks after the first description of the Falls:

> (What common language to unravel?
> . . combed into straight lines
> from the rafter of a rock's
> lip.)
>
> (p.15)

The Falls quicken the action and give a sense of dramatic chaos, invariably related to the chaotic attempt to comb out the language. As Joel Conarroe points out, it is evident that Williams has set up an equation between the Fall and the man's language in order to contrast the free flow of the river with the stasis in the mind.[35] It is the poet's task to order the flow of his thoughts, and thus to find order in the chaos of the pouring language.

Paterson refers to the young girls of the area. They are likened to flowers: "Innumerable women, each like a flower" (p.15).

The flower spreads its colored petals
wide in the sun
But the tongue of the bee
misses them
They sink back into the loam
crying out
(p.20)

This new image suggests the lack of fructifying communication between sexes, and the failure of marriage. The tongue of the bee misses the flower, and instead of marriage the girls, divorced from language, take a lesser satisfaction. The frustrated girls from decayed families are divorced from their mind and the language.

The language is missing them
they die also
incommunicado.
The language, the language
fells them
they do not know the words
or have not
the courage to use them.
–Girls from
families that have decayed and
taken to the hills: no words.
They may look at the torrent in
their minds
and it is foreign to them..
they turn their backs
and grow faint–but recover!
Life is sweet
they say: the language
–The language

is divorced from their minds,
the language...the language!

(pp.20–21)

This idea of the failure of language resulting in the death of the girls is significantly related to the poem's major function–to find a redeeming language whereby man's premature death might be prevented. Mrs. Cumming jumped into the Falls to her death because she was unable to dicipher the "false language pouring," "crashing upon a stone ear" (p.24) and because "she was married with empty words" (p.102). Sam Patch was not divorced from the deed but he leapt into the Falls and was drowned in the stream when speech failed him. The deed is always far in advance of the language available to record it and hence divorce is the controlling theme of the time. There is no communication between man and woman. Instead, divorce is "the sign of knowledge in our time,/divorce! divorce!" (p.28). The language of love is missing. Marriage is no answer unless it is the product of a language whose words are not empty, that is, are capable of communicating sensory experience and rooted in the local ground. If they are empty, then divorce cannot be avoided.

The protagonist continues in the role of poet, brooding on the partial mastery of language and on his own inadequacies. In his constant symbolic plunges into the torrent of language Paterson himself is a man, who, like Patch, dives from cliffs and the edges of water falls, to this death – finally. The image of the Falls, the urgency of its solution obsessing his mind, recurs over and over.

The water pouring still
from the edge of the rocks, filling
his ears with its sound, hard to interpret.
A wonder!

(p.26)

In Book II, the scene is the Park. Paterson climbs the cliff, and as he walks from place to place, looking and listening, his thoughts move in a kind

of free association. After an interior monologue on the question of art versus life there appears the eloquent passage on the necessity for invention which is crucial to the overall theme of *Paterson.*

> Without invention nothing is well spaced,
> unless the mind change, unless
> the stars are new measured, according
> to their relative positions, the
> line will not change, the necessity
> will not matriculate: unless there is
> a new mind there cannot be a new
> line, the old will go on
> repeating itself with recurring
> deadliness: without intervention
> nothing lies under the witch-hazel
> bush, the alder does not grow from among
> the hummocks margining the all
> but spent channel of the old swale,
> the small foot-prints
> of the mice under the overhanging
> tufts of the bunch-grass will not
> appear: without invention the line
> will never again take on its ancient
> divisions when the word, a supple word,
> lived in it, crumbled now to chalk.
>
> (p.65)

Invention is the mother of art. Without invention no verse can exist. To fall back on the old is to confess that one has lost contact with things as they exist. The inauthenticity of the language of the citizens of Paterson was caused by their detachment from reality. What is in question here is, of course, the need of a new measure consonant with our times. The poet is saying that a new mind and a new metrical line are required in order to make the world come true.

Paterson, now called "Faitoute", continues to walk and to observe. The scholars provide no aid in the quest, since they are encased in the

strands of water, lodged, impotent, under the flow of language. The evangelist, too, offers no clue as he shouts with his "useless voice" (p.76) to the birds and trees. "The falls of his harangue hung featureless/upon the ear" (p.87). When evening falls, Faitoute is left alone, watching the May moon. He meditates on the sermon, and then launches into an angry denunciation of modern poets, who borrow from learning. Then he makes an intense effort to decipher the meaning of the roar:

> caught (in mind)
> beside the water he looks down, listens!
> But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused
> uproar: missing the sense (though he tries)
> untaught but listening, shakes with the intensity
> of his listening.
>
> (p.100)

He is comforted only by the thought of the stream, "its terrifying plunge, inviting marriage" (p.100). He sees a hideously deformed dwarf who symbolizes the artist neglected by an insensitive populace. He flees, pursued by the roar, and then regains his footing on solid earth. After overcoming his paralyzing anger and despair, he ends by singing to himself "a song written previously." The focus, however, shifts with the introduction of the long letter from Miss Cress saying her own stasis and the indignation she feels toward the poet. The book ends with page after page of tedious, neurotic complaint. And so the quest must continue.

In Book III Paterson goes to the library to find what was missing at the Falls themselves, seeking an interpretation in books, in the languages of others. He finds old newspaper clippings about the cyclone, fire, and flood in Paterson, New Jersey. The row of books oppresses him and his mind drifts, constantly returning to a girl, "Beautiful Thing." He searches in the printed page, but his mind is "elsewhere/looking down/Seeking" (p.136). He meditates on love, marriage, and death, and introduces the theme of the "radiant gist." He repeats the distinction between the silent library which "contains/nothing of you," and Beautiful Thing. As he sits in the library the

reading begins to overwhelm him:

> The stream
> grows leaden within him, his lilies drag. So
> be it. Texts mount and complicate them-
> selves, lead to further texts and those
> to synopses, digests and emendations. So be it.
> Until the words break loose or–sadly
> hold, unshaken.....
>
> (p.156)

It is essential to the rejuvenation of the language that the words break loose. If the words "hold," the language, "sadly," will not be renewed.

Paterson reads old documents about the flood in the city. There is a parallelism worked out between the gradual inundation in the city and the waterfall that pours through Paterson's mind. And there is a page of advice from Pound, written in St. Elizabeth's hospital. The letter insists on Williams' lack of an adequate literary background. The book comes to a FULL STOP, and deals with the landscape of the city following the water's recession – with the shapelessness of things. This also is related to the shape of the mind, and the quest is restated:

> How to begin to find a shape – to begin to
> begin again,
> turning the inside out : to find one phrase
> that will
> lie married beside another for delight
> –seems beyond attainment .
>
> (p.167)

The mind, like the city, must be reformed: "The words will have to be rebricked up" (p.170). Paterson, the poet, is seeking, in the library, for the language appropriate to contemporary culture. The reaffirmation of starting from scratch sustains and heightens the belief that there can be no return to the past:

The past above, the future below
and the present pouring down: the roar,
the roar of the present, a speech –
is, of necessity, my sole concern.
(p.172)

Thus the poet rejects the library as the sole answer to his quest, while at the same time reaffirming the value of the quest:

I cannot stay here
to spend my life looking into the past:

the future's no answer. I must
find my meaning and lay it, white,
beside the sliding water: myself –
comb out the language – or succumb

– whatever the complexion. Let
me out (Well, go!) this rhetoric
is real!
(p.173)

In Book IV the river approaches its mouth, which eventually merges with the East River. With this approach "international character begins to enter the innocent river and perverts it; sexual perversions, such things that every metropolis when you get to know it houses."[36] The first part of the book deals with this perversion. It consists primarily of conversations. The talkers are the young nurse named Phyllis and the wealthy, cultured old poetess called Corydon. The older woman asks Phyllis about her personal life, and makes a pathetic attempt at seduction. Phyllis's replies are earthy and unimaginative, revealing both her vitality and the utter paucity of her linguistic resources. The perverse confusions such as the Corydon-Phyllis relationship also result from a failure to untangle the language and make it our own. Sexual perversions and barren human relationships are the modern replicas of the elemental character of America. In marked contrast to these

women, the poet introduces the story of Madame Curie's successful quest for the "gist" that will cure cancer, describing the discovery in terms of a physical birth. Williams' aim is to document the discovery by Curie and to show its bearing on his own quest for the radiant gist in language. For, as Pearce puts it, language is that which, if it is properly used, "signifies the degree to which man has lived according to his own deepest and truest image of himself and his possibilities."[37] So the poet refers to the problem of language again:

> Haven't you forgot your virgin purpose,
> the language?
>
> What language? "The past is for those who
> lived in the past," is all she told me.
> (p.219)

In Book V the poet says that he has "grown older" (p.268) and is now "the old man" (p.269) with an "aging body" (p.270). He has moved away from the life of the senses, and now, detached, he observes his life. It is the world of art that now holds his attention. Only the creator survives. The art of the tapestries has endured. The works of Pollock, Freud, Picasso, Beethoven, Brueghel and many others survive. This is the legacy Paterson would leave behind. Assuming the role of sage and instructing youth out of his age and wisdom, he speaks of trying

> to get the young
> to foreshorten
> their efforts in the use of words which
> he had found so difficult, the errors
> he had made in the use of the
> poetic line:
> (p.268)

The poem, thus, ends with the recognition that the measured dance (new-measured language) offers a possible solution to the quest. He is

instructing young poets that the redemption is to be found in a tongue that speaks from our time and our region.

IV

We have so far followed Williams' quest for a redeeming language in *Paterson* and have seen that Williams cries out in it for the remarriage of man to man and to nature through language, in a tongue that speaks from our time and our region. Williams says that divorce is "the sign of knowledge in our time" and Mrs. Cumming, for example, "was married with empty words," that is to say, the language poisoned by false knowledge and learning. Williams is not rejecting scholarship and historical research. He is, rather, making a discriminating rejection of mere academic learning – of learning that has no relationship to the local present or to human concerns. This is the reason why he cries she had better be divorced from such knowledge and learning. For the same reason he says that the library in Book III had better be destroyed by the fire and flood. In spite of such a tragic and destructive view, however, it is evident that the quest for a new language commensurate with the present world was his primary concern. To choose a local place and to use American language in order to record the unique American experience was the burden, and the triumph, of *Paterson*.

At this point a troublesome and difficult question presents itself: What new form did he invent or what new measure did he discover in the process of composing *Paterson*? In this work verse and prose constantly alternate, creating a kaleidoscopic effect. Williams uses quotations from local history books, newspaper clippings, political advertisements, a medical case history, interviews, and letters from real people. Anything, regardless of its form, was included if it helped his insight into the past and present of the city.

The prose selections differ greatly in style and tone. The letters of Miss Cress are self-consciously literary and constrained, those of Allen Ginsberg romantic and over-written, those of the Negro girl and Phyllis ungrammatical, and Pound's letters are boisterous and blunt. Some of the

historical documents have a quaint and archaic flavor, while others are flat. The language of the political advertisements is straightforward and the tone arrogant. In each case the style provides implicit commentary on the writer and the period in which it was written.

The prose, moreover, helps to give the poem its unique improvisational rhythm, slowing the pace, breaking a mood, giving a sense of relaxation between the more heightened passages of verse. Williams did not agree with Wallace Stevens' much-quoted assertion that he used the anti-poetic as a heightening device. He says that all prose "has primarily the purpose of giving a metrical meaning to or of emphasizing a metrical continuity between all word used. It is *not* an anti-poetic device, the repeating of which piece of miscalculation makes me want to puke. It is that prose and verse are both *writing*, both a matter of the words and an interrelation between words for purpose of exposition, or other better defined purpose of the art.... The truth is that there's an *identity* between prose and verse, not an antithesis. It all rests on the same time base, the same measure."[38] The poetic and the anti-poetic are "all one piece."[39]

It is important to note, moreover, that Williams recorded in this poem the common idiom just as it was spoken.

> ... Geeze, Doc, I guess it's all right
> but what the hell does it mean?
>
> (p.138)

> Have any of these men
> you speak of
> –and has he?
> No.
> Good.
> What's good about it?
> Then you're still a virgin!
> What's it to *you*?
>
> (p.200)

These are just such "auditory scraps from the language." Like much of the conversational-poetry in Book IV, the language is completely unadorned. Bare and natural, it is the language of everyday speech.

His verse is even more varied than the prose. There are passages written in a long Whitmanesque line, others in the more typical Williams measure, short and nervous. In a letter to Richard Eberhart, he says, "I have never been one to write by rule, even by my own rules. Let's begin with the rule of counted syllables, in which all poems have been written hitherto. That has become tiresome to my ear."[40] Williams felt conventional forms were no longer pertinent to the economic and social fabric of today. Whitman broke the old line, but Williams could not rest until he had found a new one. He could not approve "Free" verse. Verse must avoid the old measure, but it must be governed by measure – a measure consonant with our time. In the same letter he continues, "By measure I mean musical pace. Now, with music in our ears the words need only be taught to keep as distinguished an order, as chosen a character, as regular, according to the music, as in the best of prose." Giving some examples he adds, "Over the whole poem it (a single beat) gives a pattern to the meter that can be felt as a new measure. It gives resources to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day." Anyhow this explanation helps us to understand that Williams sought for a new measure consonant with our time.

In the course of composing Book II of *Paterson* Williams created a new measure called "relativistic or variable foot."[41]

The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned
Memory is a kind
of accomplishment
a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new
places
inhabited by hordes
heretofore unrealized,

of new kinds –
since their movements
are toward new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned)
(p.96)

The line pattern is 3-3-1–3-3-1, the seventh and fourteenth being long and stable, and thereby providing mental plateaus, or rests, before the continued descent. The lines are measured in musical phrases and the words function like notes in a musical pattern. The word "relativistic" derives from Einstein. "Relativity," Williams wrote, "gives us the cue. . . .Measure, an ancient word in poetry, something we have almost forgotten in its literal significance as something measured, becomes related again with the poetic. We have today to do with the poetic, as always, but a relatively stable foot, not a rigid one. That is all the difference. It is that which must become the object of our search..."[42] Relativity replaces the absolute. There are only innumerable local centers, each rediating its own unique power to measure them. The rejection of absolute time and space means the rejection of absolute measure. Measure must now be relative, rooted in a particular place. It must measure speech freely, not mold it according to some fixed pattern. This triadic step-down line of the variable foot was later used with astonishing success in "Of Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," the love poem of his later years. In each case the rhythmical construction is determined by the language as spoken. When the language takes on intensity, the stops for breath come more often and the line breaks into short, nervous segments. When the ideas and language ease up, the line also relaxes and flows at a more leisurely pace. It seems to me that this new measure is more consonant with the rhythm of the modern American life. Robert Lowell says, "It's as if no poet except Williams had really seen America or heard its language."[43] J. Hillis Miller also puts it, "Williams has perhaps the most subtle ear of any American poet, and many of his poems are marvels of exquisite auditory harmony, each word fitting perfectly in sound the others. Criticism can only in lumbering awkwardness catch and analyze these evanescent melodies."[44] One is right in thinking that Williams was the pioneer poet who left behind

an example of true invention, or a new measure in language actually appropriate to contemporary America.

NOTES

1) *Cf.* Norman E. Eliason: *The Language of Chaucer's Poetry: An Appraisal of the Verse, Style, and Structure* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1972).
2) Norman H. Person: "The American Poet as Maker of Speech" in *Some American Studies* (Kyoto: Apollon-sha, 1964), p. 46.
3) Louise Brogan: *Achievement in American Poetry* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), p. 100.
4) *American Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 107.
5) *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. John C. Thirlwall (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1957), p. 185.
6) *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951), pp. 360-361.
7) "To Write American Poetry," *Fantasy – A Poetry Quaterly* (Pittsburgh, Summer 1935), p. 13. Cf. J. Hillis Miller: *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 342.
8) Roy Harvey Pearce: *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 90.
9) *Paterson* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1963), p. 50.
10) Hyatt H. Waggoner: *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1968) pp. 373-374.
11) Stanley Koehler, "The Art of Poetry VI; William Carlos Williams" (interview), *The Paris Review*, XXXII (Summer-Fall 1964), 117.
12) *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 289-290.
13) Hugh Kenner: "William Carlos Williams: In Memoriam," *National Review*, XIV (March 26, 1963), 237.
14) "Prose from *Spring and All*," in Miller, ed., *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 20.
15) *Spring and All* (Dijon: Contact Publishing Co., 1923), p. 3. Cf. Miller, ed., William Carlos Williams, p. 4.
16) "Introduction" to Byron Vazakas, *Transfigured Night* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), p. xi.
17) *Selected Essays*, p. 5.

18) An important letter to Marianne Moore describes this union of inner and outer and the "security" which resulted from it. It is, he says, "something which occurred once when I was about twenty, a sudden resignation to existence, a despair–if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up" (*Selected Letters*, p. 147).
19) *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1957), p. 72.
20) *The Great American Novel* (Paris: Three Mountain Press, 1923), pp. 10–11.
21) *Ibid.*, p.26.
22) "Prose from *Spring and All*," in Miller, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 25.
23) *Selected Essays*, p. 115.
24) *Ibid.*, p. 128.
25) *Ibid.*, p. 115.
26) *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, p. 330.
27) *Ibid.*, p. 331. o28)
28) "How to Write,"*New Direction in Prose and Poetry*, IV (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1939), no pagination.
29) *Selected Essays*, p. 266.
30) *The Selected Letters*, p. 297.
31) "Prose from *Spring and All*" in Miller, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 26.
32) *The Selected Letters*, p. 147.
33) *The Autobiography*, p. 362.
34) *Paterson*, p. 11. Page numbers for subsequent quotations will be given in the text.
35) Joel Conarroe, *William Carlos Williams' Paterson: Language and Landscape* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), pp. 83–86.
36) *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, ed. Edith Heal (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 79.
37) Pearce, *op. cit.*, p. 128.
38) *Selected Letters*, p. 263, 265.
39) *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, p. 52.
40) *The Selected Letters*, p. 325.
41) *Ibid.*, p. 335.
42) *Selected Essays*, p. 340.
43) Robert Lowell, "William Carlos Williams," *The Hudson Review*, XIV (Winter 1961-62), 530-536.
44) J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality*, p. 319.